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Expert thinks North wasn't acting alone

5 By Michael Mecham
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It's impossible for arms shipments — like those sent to Iran — to leave U.S. supply depots without key military and diplomatic figures knowing about it, an arms expert says.

A "That's just too preposterous to defy comprehension," said Sam Cummings, the world's premier weapons salesman, owner of Inter-arms in Alexandria, Va.

"In spite of his position in the White House, there is no way (Marine Lt. Col. Oliver) North can on his own authority call anybody and say, 'I need 2,000 TOW (anti-tank) missiles, please ship them to airport X.'"

Still, congressional investigators are probing reports that the National Security Council pulled strings to bypass normal purchasing channels at the Pentagon and State Department so others in the government would not be alerted to the plot to sell arms to Iran and use the proceeds to benefit the contras.

"Ollie North may have been pulling strings to bypass State," commented Stephen Goose of the Center for Defense Information. "It's not as preposterous as it sounds."

Also raising concern: recent revelations that military bookkeeping is so sloppy that soldiers routinely hide thefts of weapons, which they sell on the black market.

North, former deputy to NSC chief John Poindexter, was fired for the Iran affair. Poindexter resigned.

Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., said Wednesday that a CIA-hired airline shipped what it thought were oil-drill spare parts to Iran in November 1985 that were actually weapons — despite a ban on selling weapons to the Iranians.

Attorney General Edwin Meese said others besides North played a "tangential" role in the arms transfer. He would not elaborate.

Cummings, a former CIA weapons expert who's been running an apolitical weapons shop since 1953, insists that it would take more than a "tangential relationship" by other officials to move the arms.

"You just can't do it" alone, he said, "Even with a wink and a nod from Ronnie (President Reagan)."

Cummings sells machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, light recoilless artillery and other small

arms to any government that wants them — provided they can get an export license from the State Department or authorities in England.

Today his customers include many of the Persian Gulf states — he won't name names — Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. He's sold to Cuba's Castro and Trujillo when it was legal, but turned down Idi Amin and Moammar Gadhafi.

The anti-Sandinistas are another potential client — "We've got everything they need" — but U.S. laws prohibit the sale, he said.